

VAYEIRA

## THE EVERLASTING ZECHUS OF AKEIDAS YITZCHAK

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### The Background of Akeidas Yitzchak

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The story of Akeidas Yitzchak begins with an introduction. “After these things, Hashem tested Avraham... and He said, ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moria, and bring him as a sacrifice on one of the mountains that I will show you’” (Bereishis 22:1-2).

This dramatic story is one of the central events in the whole Torah. It is so central that we read it every year on Rosh Hashana and ask Hashem to remember the Akeida of Yitzchak. Why was this event so eternally significant? Also, what are the preceding episodes that the Torah refers to as “these things,” and what is their relationship to the Akeida?

The Shem Mishmuel cites a Midrash Tanchuma (Lech Lecha 11) which asks: Why does one normally bring a *korban olah*? The Midrash answers that it is brought to atone for inappropriate thoughts.

This Midrash is based on the words of the opening *pasuk* of the story of the Akeida: “And it was after these things.”

The Midrash states that Avraham thought that he had already

received all his rewards for his good deeds in this world. “When I was young, fighting Nimrod,” thought Avraham, “I was saved when they threw me into the fire. In the war against the four kings, I conquered the invading armies, and Hashem saved me in a miraculous way. And now, I have received the gift of the Holy Land and have a wonderful son, Yitzchak. I am wealthy, and kings honor me and seek my alliance. I have received so much from Hashem in this world for all the good deeds that I have done. I probably deserve no more reward for them in the World to Come.” In his modesty, Avraham thought that Hashem already had rewarded him in this world for his good deeds. According to this Midrash, since Avraham had these thoughts, he was obligated to bring his son Yitzchak as an *olah* to atone for his improper thoughts about his reward.

Asks the Shem Mishmuel: What was wrong with Avraham’s thinking? Don’t *tzaddikim* often think that they are unworthy of Hashem’s blessings?

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## B

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### Undeserved Reward

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The *pasuk* states, “*U’lecha Hashem chesed ki atah seshaleim l’ish k’ma’aseihu*. You, Hashem, are merciful, because You pay people according to their actions” (Tehillim 62:13). This *pasuk* is hard to understand. When someone receives a free gift, we would refer to the gift as a *chesed*, a kindness. If, however, someone does his job and is paid by his employer, the payment for his work is not *chesed*—it’s what he deserves! If we listen to Hashem, our reward doesn’t seem like *chesed*. It is more like *din*, justly earned and deserved. Where is the *chesed* in reward for *mitzvos*?

The Shem Mishmuel answers this question by explaining a fundamental difference between a Jew who does *mitzvos* and a worker who does his job. Jews are *avadim*, slaves of Hashem.

The Torah states, “*Avadai heim*. The Jews are *My* slaves” (Vayikra 25:42). In this sense, Hashem replaced Pharaoh as master of the Jewish people. As a slave master, Pharaoh had no obligation to pay his slaves for their work. Once we left Egypt, Hashem became our new Master, and we His slaves. He thus has no obligation to compensate us for our work. And if Hashem does reward us, it is not due to an obligation, but rather is an act of *chesed* on His part.

In fact, every human being is God’s slave, since He created all people. He gives us every moment of our lives. He makes our bodies function and gives us the ability to think. Hashem gives and takes away as He wills. We are completely His. Every moment of a person’s life is indeed a blessed, Divine gift.

*Halacha* states that when someone creates something, he legally owns it. Rav Chaim Brisker taught that this is the most fundamental *kinyan*, act of possession—more so than buying something or receiving it as a gift. God created the whole world. From stars to planets, to the air that we breathe, to the food that we eat, to the very earth that we walk on—everything is His. It is ludicrous to think that we have any claims on Him. He completely owns us and the world we live in. As we say in the first blessing of Shemoneh Esrei, God is the “*Konei Hakol*,” the Creator and Possessor of everything.

Our Sages state: “*Schar mitzva b’hai alma leka*, There is no reward for a *mitzva* in this world” (Kiddushin 39b). We have no claim to a reward for *mitzvos*, which are God’s commandments to us. As His servants, we must obey Him.

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### Hashem Chooses to Reward Us

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Hashem could simply force us to listen to Him like He forced Pharaoh. Generally, though, Hashem does not force people to do His will. *Din*, justice, demands that we follow God’s will and that He

should force us to do so. *Chesed*, though, allows us to agree to choose to do Hashem's will. It is as if Hashem says to us, "Even though you are My *avadim*, I want you to choose freely. I give you the choice to say 'no.' When you do a *mitzva*, I will give you reward as if you had volunteered to perform it. If you do My will, I will grant your wishes." Part of Hashem's *chesed* is that He deals with us as equals and rewards us for our services.

Legally, though, G-d is our Master and we are His servants. But, in His infinite goodness, He decided to deal with us with kindness and generosity as free agents. The Names Yud Kei Vav Kei and Elokim signify different levels of Hashem's interaction with the world. Yud Kei Vav Kei refers to Hashem's *chesed*, while Elokim refers to His *midas hadin*.

Hashem assures us of our reward using the name Yud Kei Vav Kei, as the *pasuk* we cited earlier states: "*U'lecha Hashem chesed ki ata seshaleim l'ish k'ma'aseihu.*" When we do good, Hashem responds in kind, almost as if we were equals.

We can now explain the puzzling Midrash with which we began. Avraham Avinu was thinking, "Hashem has given me so much. Why? Because I did good deeds and deserved reward. Now, though, I have used up my reward." This was because Avraham viewed Hashem's reward as real *s'char*, as real *din*. Avraham knew that Hashem has tremendous *chesed*. But when it came to reward for *mitzvos*, he thought that Hashem operated only under the rules of *din*.

The truth, though, is that from the perspective of justice, we don't deserve *any* reward at all. Reward for *mitzvos* is *purely chesed*. Therefore, in contrast to being paid for a job, where the employee gets paid only once, Hashem may grant a person reward again and again for a single *mitzva*. The power of one *mitzva* is so great that it can reward a person numerous times. This incredible concept is at the root of Chassidus, which emphasizes the importance of every single *mitzva*.

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## The Incredible Effect of a Single *Mitzva*

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The Baal Shem Tov taught that we are limited in our view of people. We see people who do good things and we think they have done something nice but not terribly significant. Imagine, for example, a person who says a *perek* of Tehillim. It is a nice act, but will it save a city, bring peace to Israel, or give someone a *refua shleima*? Can big things happen from just one *perek* of Tehillim? The answer, surprisingly, is *yes*! The reward for a *mitzva* comes from Hashem's infinite *chesed*, and it is far beyond what we imagine.

The Rambam writes (Hilchos Teshuva 3:8):

A person always should look at himself and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. [Thus,] if he performs one sin, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings destruction upon himself.

[On the other hand,] if he performs one *mitzva*, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others.

The whole world could depend on one person reciting one chapter of Tehillim. Incredible! The Baal Shem Tov made this an axiom of Chassidus. The Torah doesn't want us to judge people based on superficial impressions. We shouldn't say, "Oh, he said only one *perek* of Tehillim. He gave only five dollars to charity." Don't underestimate the value of a good deed. A person can be rewarded for one "small" *mitzva* a million times over. Hashem cherishes even the smallest good deed. He says, "This sweet person performed My will. He should be rewarded again and again, forever." Chazal say that if a person does a good deed, "*zacha lo ul'zaro ad olam*,

He and his descendants have everlasting merit and reward” (Sifra on Vayikra, s.v. *De’Chovah perek 12*).

Who knows how many good deeds were done by our parents and grandparents? They all contributed to the amazing blessings we see today. Look at the blessing of the State of Israel. Look at the blessings of the economic well-being of Jews in America. Years ago, who could have imagined how many Jewish children are being born now and the number of people learning Torah? These blessings are founded on the *mitzvos* performed by millions of Jews over the course of thousands of years. The reward for those *mitzvos* is indeed infinite.

Year after year on Rosh Hashana, we invoke the *zechus* of Akeidas Yitzchak. Its reward never runs dry. Since then, Hashem remembers the dedication of Avraham. Chazal say that even if one could imagine that the merits of the *avos* have run dry, the merit of Akeidas Yitzchak, which they call *bris avos*, still lasts forever (see Tosfos Shabbos 55a s.v. *U’shmuel*). Hashem told us that Akeidas Yitzchak will be the symbol of reward for all *mitzvos*. It was a lesson to Avraham and to all Jews after him that *s’char mitzva* might never be used up. Hashem’s *chesed* is limitless, and His reward is potentially infinite.

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### Lessons for Today

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We, *baruch Hashem*, merit to live in a generation with tremendous Torah learning. This a limitless source of blessing. However, we should appreciate the small things we do as well. When a person asks for charity and you can give only a quarter, give the quarter. Who knows how much reward will come to the Jewish People from that one quarter? Every action counts. Little *mitzvos* are not as insignificant as one might think.

With this understanding, Chazal instruct us to be as careful

with “small” *mitzvos* as with “large” ones, because we don’t know the actual reward of *mitzvos* (Pirkei Avos 2:1). We should do small *mitzvos* with the same intensity and commitment as the large ones. We can’t know for which *mitzva* Hashem will give us great reward. He could very well do so for an easy, small *mitzva* as much as for a challenging, great *mitzva*.

At the end of the Akeida, Hashem told Avraham, “All the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants, because you hearkened to My voice” (Bereishis 22:18). Avraham learned then that, in Hashem’s plan, there is a combination of *chesed* and *din*. Sometimes justice prevails, while at other times kindness prevails. Sometimes the *din* itself is *chesed*, and sometimes the *chesed* is *din*. Avraham first thought Hashem was going to kill Yitzchak, which would be *din*. But it really was *chesed*, with reward for all generations to come.

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### **The Combination of *Chesed* and *Din***

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Hashem’s *chesed* is fundamental to everything. Nothing exists without it. Therefore, we always have access to rewards for any *mitzva*, even a small one. We should trust in Hashem and His kindness that never expires.

We can use this idea to increase our faith and endure difficult situations of *din*. We can be like Avraham, who learned that God’s kindness is the foundation of everything that happens in this world, even in the most difficult situations.

May Hashem bless us with the faith needed to perform even small *mitzvos* with enthusiasm and dedication.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. What thoughts did Avraham have prior to being commanded regarding the Akeida?
2. Why do we read about and invoke the memory of the Akeida every year on Rosh Hashana?
3. Why do Chazal teach us that *s'char mitzva b'hai alma leka*—there is no reward for *mitzvos* in this world (Kiddushin 39b)?
4. Describe the difference between the salary a worker receives and the *s'char* we receive for the performance of *mitzvos*.

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## PERSONAL QUESTIONS

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1. List two “large” *mitzvos* you have done.
2. List two “small” *mitzvos* you have done.
3. Do you have the same enthusiasm for both “small” and “large” *mitzvos*?

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## EXERCISES

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5. Log the *mitzvos* you do one day and rate them as “large” or “small.”
6. Rate your enthusiasm for each *mitzva* you did on that day on a scale of 1 to 10.
7. How could you improve your enthusiasm? Do it for one week.
8. Do the above one day a week for a month.





